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Urgent Intervention Needed to Save CTE Programs in USVI, Lawmakers Hear

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Technical and vocational education in the territory is in danger, senators heard this week during a meeting of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Education & Workforce Development. However, Committee Chair Marise James is determined to resolve these issues. "I will not let it fall," she declared on Wednesday in response to testimony from JoAnn Murphy, chair of the Virgin Islands Career and Technical Education Board.

From Murphy, lawmakers learned that half of the CTE programs of study have been lost over the past two decades. More could follow in the next five years, she said, without necessary interventions being made. "The situation is dire and we must act now to prevent further erosion of CTE," she said in her written testimony. While the board Murphy chairs does have the legal authority to create and implement CTE programs, it doesn't have what it needs to do so. "This

lack of resources,” Murphy wrote, “has led to a situation where CTE programs are not adequately funded, CTE instructors are not paid at competitive rates, and key requests for resources and staffing have gone unanswered.”

Neglecting CTE programs, Murphy argued, could exacerbate unemployment and poverty rates. She urged the committee to ensure that the territory was in full compliance with federal law, namely the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, so as to maximize federal funds available to the USVI for CTE. She listed several instances where efforts to prioritize CTE have fallen severely short, from unanswered requests for resources and unfilled key positions. Several instructors, she said, remain unpaid since February of this year.

Murphy emphasized that effective leadership within CTE is essential, criticizing a recent decision to appoint an academic principal rather than a CTE-trained director. She stressed the need for specialized expertise: “It would be like having an art teacher fix the brakes on your vehicle. While they may have valuable skills in their field, they may not have the specialized knowledge needed to ensure your safety on the road.”

The CTE Board chair also made the case for separate, dedicated resources and space for CTE programs. “By investing separately and allocating resources to CTE programs, we can equip our students with the vital skills and knowledge needed for successful entry into the workforce, thus creating a brighter future for our community.” Murphy says remaining under the VI Department of Education is no longer viable, especially since crucial financial information about CTE is not forthcoming from DOE officials. “When we have inquired into this we can’t get an answer. When we ask how much money Education receives for CTE programs, we’re not getting an answer. When our students, our CTE students, would like to go to the various competitions — a very important part of CTE — they’re being told no there’s no money for that... we’re going backwards,” Murphy complained.

In general, senators expressed grave concern over the state of CTE in the territory. A recipient of vocational training and an auto mechanic by trade, Senator Dwayne DeGraff said that he was bothered and offended by the content of Murphy’s testimony. A disturbed Senator Franklin Johnson gave Murphy his contact details, asking her to meet with him to discuss these issues and figure out a way forward.

Senator Diane Capeheart called for a meeting of the committee specifically to hear how DOE and CTE officials can address the longstanding concerns Murphy admitted precede her tenure in the position. The committee leaders, Sens. Marise James and Donna Frett-Gregory, also vowed to help Murphy get answers from the Education Department, and also to clarify the hierarchical relationship between CTE and DOE before the beginning of the next school year.

Murphy acknowledged the efforts of Dr. Monique Faulkner, state director for CTE and Adult Education, in rebranding and securing increased funding. However, she pointed out that those efforts would be in vain if CTE doesn’t become an independent division with its own funding and direct management. “The time for action is now,” Mr. Murphy said. What we have no longer works.”